

Exploring Imagery and Symbols

Name: _____

Date: _____

Imagery and symbols are a special kind of language. Authors use imagery and symbols to say more than literal statements can.

Both make use of the difference between what a word literally means—its “denotation”—and the extra ideas associated with it—its “connotation.”

IMAGERY

Imagery is the use of selected details to describe one thing in terms of another thing. This comparison helps evoke additional meanings or feelings: “He ran like the wind” or “She was more beautiful than any angel!”

How imagery works in a story Individual images create vivid pictures in the reader’s mind that link the person, place, or object described with the special qualities of the image. Images can be used in flattering and unflattering ways.

Strings of related images can work together to create a mood or set a tone for the whole story.

SYMBOLS

A **symbol** is any image, object, character, or action that stands for an idea (or ideas) beyond its literal meaning. Writers use symbols to suggest larger meanings radiating from the specifics of their story.

Conventional and nonconventional symbols Many symbols are universally recognized—for example, the American flag, which is commonly recognized as a symbol for the United States.

Other symbols are not so universally defined. They do not acquire meaning until it is defined by how they are used in the context of a story. They may even suggest more than one meaning, suggesting a variety of possible associations. An example is the symbol of “snow,” which might be used to symbolize goodness because of its whiteness, or cruelty because of its coldness.

How to recognize symbols in short stories You can often look for symbols in some of these parts of a story:

- Story titles; also character and place names
- Nature images: snow, thunderstorms, etc.
- Allusions to classical and other literary and historical references
- Images or figures that appear at important points in the story
- Images that seem to receive special emphasis or are often repeated

QUESTIONS TO ASK WHILE YOU ARE READING A SHORT STORY:

1. What imagery does the author use to describe character and setting? What are the effects of these images?
2. What symbols do you recognize in the story? What clues let you recognize these symbols?